

Eckels encourages Citizen Corp participation

By Amanda Waters, Staff Writer

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Harris County Judge Robert Eckels discussed emergency management and the importance of community involvement at the Jan. 7 meeting of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce Emergency Preparedness Committee, specifically encouraging people to get involved with the Harris County Citizen Corp.

"What we're doing is not just building a response to terrorism, but a sustained response and recovery system," Eckels said. "And in the process, we have become more ready for natural disasters. The goal is to be ready for any situation, from localized neighborhood incidents to mass events, like Tropical Storm Allison."

According to Eckels, Harris County Citizen Corp is the county's response to President George W. Bush's call for volunteerism in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The Harris County Citizen Corps Council coordinates with volunteer groups such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the United Way, and Citizen Corps programs to identify volunteer opportunities. The Citizen Corps programs include the Community Emergency Response Team, the Neighborhood Watch Program, Volunteers in Police Service, and the Medical Reserve Corps.

Volunteers with Citizen Corp not only provide service to their communities every day, Eckels noted, but, in being available, volunteers help prepare their communities for emergency situations.

Since the president's initial challenge, Harris County has led the way in establishing effective Citizen Corp programs, Eckels said, and has become a model for the nation. Eckels added that he has even been able to talk with other towns and cities to help them as they establish their own Citizen Corp programs.

However, the most well-thought out, organized programs won't help a

community unless members of that community are part of the program, Eckels said. In short, Citizen Corp needs community participation.

"I don't think we'll ever get everyone involved," Eckels admitted, "but hopefully there will be enough so that in an emergency, we'll still be prepared."

Mark Sloan, special projects and community services with Eckels' office, also noted that getting people involved takes time and education. The Northwest Chamber has worked closely with Eckels and with Sloan in the past year to do just that, particularly in regard to educating the community on the importance of participation in Community Emergency Response Teams, or CERT teams.

CERT teams are about helping yourself, your family and your neighbors, Sloan said. Those who go through CERT team training are prepared, not to replace first responders and other emergency professionals, but to assist them. And in the event that first responders are cut off from the site of an emergency, CERT teams know what to do in the meantime to keep themselves and their neighbors safe and calm.

Through the efforts of the chamber and others, northwest Harris County is getting ahead of the game, with two CERT teams that have already completed training, two that will begin their training within the next month and one that is set to graduate. Christchurch Baptist Church, which will be graduating a CERT team soon, is also planning to recruit a few more teams.

The Westador CERT team, in fact, has been activated in recent months. During a day of heavy rain Nov. 17, Westador experienced some flooding and the CERT team was able to help out by maintaining a perimeter around dangerous flood waters, freeing up at least two fire fighters to do their job.

Sloan also noted that anyone in the community can be involved on a CERT team.

"There's an 88-year-old member of the Westador team," Sloan said. "His job is communications and documentation. In California, there are CERT members in wheelchairs."

Once CERT teams complete their training, Sloan said, they're not done. Volunteers have to stay active, but the good thing is there are plenty of opportunities to stay active, either by recruiting and talking to other people in the community about participating in CERT teams or volunteering for other non-emergency community events.

Sloan said they are currently working on releasing some public service announcements from Judge Eckels' office and the governor's office to promote even more community awareness about being prepared for an emergency. Sloan and other officials from Judge Eckels' office and the Office of Emergency Management are also available to speak to neighborhood meetings and other organizations about the need for CERT teams and what they're all about. In addition, Sloan said they are trying to encourage businesses and schools to form CERT teams, because when a disaster happens, he said, you need to be able to react where you are.

Although CERT teams have had a slow start, the number of teams forming in northwest Harris County continues to grow. Marinelle Timmons, a member of the committee, said that she thinks as people get trained, it will increase that number even more as people begin to tell their friends, neighbors and co-

workers about the CERT experience.

"People are excited when they get done," Timmons said.

Becoming a CERT Trainer/Coordinator is another important way to get involved and to help the number of CERT teams grow, Sloan said. Cy-Fair College will host this course March 9-12 at their main campus. The Train-the-Trainer/Coordinator course is intended to provide the knowledge and skills needed to organize, train and implement a CERT program.

For more information about any Citizen Corp program, call Sloan at 713-755-4077 or visit www.harriscountycitizencorp.com.

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Date: Jan, 15 2004

CERT is Necessary!

Name: Jim Springer

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This is a great article about an excellent service to our community.

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